

# ADVERTISEMENT

# CHINA WATCH



A newly found 28-centimetre-tall gold mask from No 5 pit at the Sanxingdui site. JIANG HONGJING / XINHUA

## A BELATED PEEK BEHIND THE MASKS

By WANG KAIHAO

Archaeologists dream of having the chance to excavate something like this, so for Lei Yu this is the ultimate prize. Mr Lei, chief archaeologist in charge of the Sanxingdui Ruins site in Guanghan, Sichuan province, dating back more than 3,200 years, thought it would have long ago offered up all of its most stunning artifacts. The accidental discovery of two “sacrificial pits” — at least, considered as such by most scholars due to the smashed and burned objects there — in 1986 was incredible.

Then, more than 1,000 artifacts were recovered from the No 1 and No 2 pits of Sanxingdui, including numerous bronzeware items with exotic markings, as well as figurines, human face masks with protruding pupils and an exquisite 3.95-metre-tall (13 feet) “divine tree”, believed to have been worshipped as a ladder to heaven.

Sanxingdui was discovered in 1929, and the first scientific excavation was carried out in 1934. It was led by David Crockett Graham, a scholar from the United States. He was also a museum director in Chengdu. But decades of upheaval that followed interrupted work on the site, and its significance was not recognised until the discovery in the 1980s.

“Our archaeological investigations in Sanxingdui have never stopped,” said Mr Lei, a researcher with the Sichuan Provincial Cultural Relics and Archaeology Research Institute. “But no one really believed there could be more sacrificial pits.”

Ruins of city walls, foundations and tombs have been continuously unearthed within the 12-square-kilometre (2,965 acres) area of the Sanxingdui site — the biggest prehistoric city ruins on the upper reaches of Yangtze River — which resulted in archaeologists switching their focus to look for a high-level mausoleum.

Sanxingdui, though, had more to offer.

From 2019 to 2020 six more pits (No 3 to No 8) — ranging from 3.5 square metres to 19 square metres — were found near the original pair and, since October, about 500 artifacts have been unearthed in a detailed excavation.

As soon as Mr Lei’s team announced the discovery in Chengdu, Sichuan’s capital, on March 20, China’s social media was abuzz with public enthusiasm.

Mr Lei’s team has uncovered a long list of possible national treasures and, while the bulk of the recent findings have mainly come from pits 3, 4 and 5, the tips of some objects have begun to peek

through the dirt in the other three.

A gold mask unearthed from No 5 pit, sporting similar exotic features to those of the previously unearthed bronze face masks, is one of the highlights of the newly excavated items. Bronze masks and divine trees continue to appear, along with more than 100 ivory tusks. Charred sculptures and jade may add further proof to archaeologists’ speculation as to the sacrificial status of the pits.

“The quality of the bronzeware could be even better than the items found in 1986,” Mr Lei said.

But newly found types of bronzeware raise more questions. For Mr Lei, further study is still required to explain, for example, an animal decoration with an ox’s head and a dragonlike body.

When the exotic and mysterious artifacts were first discovered in 1986, myriad theories captured the public imagination, none so compelling as that claiming extraterrestrial influence on Sanxingdui culture.

“New archaeological findings could guide the public back to a scientific approach to figuring out the origins of Sanxingdui culture,” said Zhao Congcang, a professor at Northwest University in Xi’an, Shaanxi province.

“Cultures are created by people. If we can answer some questions about the people of Sanxingdui, the mysterious parts of their culture may be more easily decoded.”

So who were these people?

For researchers, the closest answer may be the ancient state of Shu, which lasted for more than a millennium until it fell to the powerful Qin state during the Warring States Period (475-221 BC).



A 2.62-metre-tall bronze statue of a human figure excavated from Sanxingdui in 1986. WANG KAIHAO / CHINA DAILY

The Shu state left many legends but the historical recordings are insufficient.

An academic project was undertaken to gain a better and more comprehensive understanding of the ancient Shu state (Sichuan is still sometimes colloquially called Shu today). If it were not for that project, the abundance of artifacts in the news today would probably still remain unknown.

Foundations were also recently found nearby, Mr Lei said.

“That helps us to have a basic understanding of the layout of the sacrificial zone. Our next step is to unveil their ritual system.”

A similar strata of objects were uncovered in the newly found pits as the two that were dug in 1986. Small items of bronzeware were at the bottom, with larger bronze items above, and the upper surfaces were paved with ivory.

Sun Hua, a professor at the School of Archaeology and Museology at Peking University, said it is possible that deeper study of the pits, their construction style and foundations will offer an insight into the interior of a prehistoric shrine.

“Religious rituals often represent the highest-level ceremonies. We’ve seen constructional remains of contemporaneous shrines in the rest of world, but they are empty now.”

“If we can recover a whole set of ceremonial artifacts used in sacrifices that date back more than 3,000 years (among the unearthed cultural relics in Sanxingdui pits), that will be an exceptional reference from which to comprehend the religion of the Shu people and their view of the universe.”

New discoveries may connect mythology passed down for generations to more facets of a prosperous civilisation through details of the lives of the Shu people.

Due to the mountainous landscape surrounding Sichuan, in ancient times the region was often considered to be relatively isolated. In a stanza written by the great Tang Dynasty (618-907) poet Li Bai, he describes the road to Shu as “even more difficult than stepping into heaven.”

Nevertheless, the findings in the Sanxingdui pits indicate that connection between the region and the outside was commonplace.

One of Mr Lei’s big hopes is to find written characters in the pits.

“We’ve just started and there are many possibilities. Thanks to Sanxingdui studies we’ll gradually come to understand Chinese civilisation originated and a mixture of different cultures united.”



**From left:** A part of a broken ivory sculpture unearthed from No 5 sacrificial pit. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY A bird-shaped gold foil recently discovered at the site. JIANG HONGJING / XINHUA Archaeologists study the No 3 sacrificial pit on March 19. LI HE / XINHUA A 1.3-metre-tall bronze mask unearthed from No 2 pit in 1986. WANG KAIHAO / CHINA DAILY A bronze divine tree is among the major relics unearthed from the site in 1986. WANG KAIHAO / CHINA DAILY

## Nationwide expansion of e-commerce zones coincides with dual-circulation development

By HE WEI

China is expanding cross-border e-commerce pilot zones as part of the drive to provide new impetus to imports and consumption, experts said.

All cities and regions that host free trade zones, comprehensive areas of cross-border e-commerce, comprehensive bonded areas, and select bonded logistics centres are now eligible to start pilot programmes of cross-border retail imports, according to a notice published in late March by a group of government departments including the Ministry of Commerce and the National Development and Reform Commission.

In these pilot areas, companies can enjoy preferential tax policies, such as exemption from value-added tax and consumption tax on retail exports and reduced corporate income tax.

Pilot cities that join the programme can use more convenient modes of imports such as “online shopping bonded import mode”, whereby

imported retail goods can be temporarily stored in a bonded warehouse before being delivered to customers.

Before this, China had approved five batches of 105 cross-border e-commerce pilot zones since the first such zone was set up in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, in 2015.

While the first two batches of 13 zones were located in larger cities in the eastern coastal areas, the third batch and onward extended to the vast inland and later included entire Hainan island, where China is planning to build a globally influential free trade zone by 2050.

Experts see the move as fitting in with China’s dual-circulation development paradigm and diversifying trade links in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative.

“This is another boon to encourage consumption of quality merchandise, given that the Covid-19 epidemic is preventing overseas travel,” said Jason Yu, general manager of the consultancy Kantar Worldpanel in China. “It’s also an answer

to the dual circulation paradigm on trade and consumption.”

China’s total imports and exports of goods expanded 1.9 per cent to 32.16tn yuan (\$4.94tn) last year, according to the General Administration of Customs. It was the world’s only major economy to register positive growth last year as the pandemic hurting global businesses.

The country’s foreign trade via cross-border e-commerce rose 31.1 per cent to 1.69tn yuan, with more than 10,000 traditional foreign trade firms going online for the first time in 2020, Xinhua News Agency said.

Chinese internet players are opening up resources to help small and medium-sized enterprises broaden the reach of customers, including helping trading companies build online pavilions to set up digital marketplaces featuring local specialties.

Companies are also forging an ecosystem in cross-border trade that covers product design, e-commerce platforms, logistics, financing and

Visitors inspect cosmetics in a duty-free shop in Sanya, Hainan province in October. China released a master plan in June to build Hainan into a globally influential free trade zone by 2050. GUO CHENG / XINHUA



beyond, said Wang Jian, a professor of international trade and economics at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing. “Small and medium-sized enterprises contrib-

ute to 95 per cent of global economic growth, and the private sector can play its part in revisiting and potentially revising the rules of world trade through such practices,” he said.

## Integrated growth picks up speed

Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region shows new strength amid Xiong'an's fourth anniversary

By XU WEI and ZHANG YU

When Li Jianhe left his hometown, the county of Rongcheng in Hebei province, for the megacity of Beijing in 1996 he was determined he would never go back.

To Mr Li, as a college student at the age of 17, the small county, about two hours’ drive from Beijing, was a backwater that lacked opportunities, in contrast with the capital.

However, 20 years later he decided to return to his hometown immediately after China announced the development of a new area in Hebei — the Xiong’an New Area, which spans three counties including Rongcheng — on April 1, 2017.

The national significance of the Xiong’an New Area is on a par with the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone and the Shanghai Pudong New Area.

Mr Li’s company, Jingxiong Group, a government affairs service provider, was among the first companies to relocate from Beijing to Xiong’an two weeks after the new area was set up.

“I made the decision based on my confidence in President Xi Jinping to advance the co-ordinated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region,” said Mr Li, who is founder and president of the company.

As Xiong’an marked its fourth anniversary on April 1, a new intercity train service began between the new area and Beijing, and tens of thousands of construction workers are working on relocation programmes, schools and a hospital. A future city is starting to take shape.

Xiong’an is at the centre of the triangular area formed by Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei’s capital, Shijiazhuang. The development of Xiong’an is the landmark plan to co-ordinate the development of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei, a strategy mapped out and carried forward by President Xi.

The integrated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region has secured some early outcomes, especially in the integration of transportation networks.

In addition to the train between Beijing and Xiong’an, a high-speed railway line connecting Beijing and Zhangjiakou, the co-host city of the Beijing Winter Olympics next year, also began operating in late 2019.

Over the past seven years 32 expressways connecting cities in the region have been opened or expanded, stretching to a length of 2,005 kilometres (1,246 miles).

In addition, Mr Li’s company has gained from the integration drive.

His startup has benefited from Xiong’an’s efforts to optimise its business environment, with the government outsourcing services to the company in areas such as the registration of new businesses and approvals for market access.

The company offered services to at least 1,500 companies that were registered in the new area, and its turnover rose to 21m yuan (\$3.2m) last year. It has also expanded its business scope from Xiong’an to Haidian district of Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei province.

“The growth of the new area is like the growing process of a human,” Mr Li said. “It must first learn to crawl before walking and then competing on a racing track.”

The Covid-19 pandemic has not slowed the process of the area’s development, he said. Instead, a slew of landmark programmes has been completed, and the public is starting to see more tangible progress in its development.

“For local residents it is also a process of transitioning from farmers to urban dwellers, and they are starting to find opportunities for employment and starting new businesses,” he said. Zhou Jun, the founder and chief executive of

Beijing Eyecool Technology Co Ltd, a company that develops biometric recognition technology, said the company’s business has benefited from the integration of the three provincial-level areas, and especially from the development of Xiong’an.

The company relocated its headquarters from the capital to Xiong’an in 2018 in the belief that the area will be a smart city for the future.

“We realised that for artificial intelligence companies and the sector as whole, the development of the new area will be a historic opportunity,” Mr Zhou said, adding that the company’s multimodal biometric recognition technology fits strongly with the area’s need to develop a smart city.

The company’s technology has been applied to more than 20 innovation programmes in Xiong’an, contributing to the development of a smart security system, parks, schools, relocation programs and the containment of Covid-19, he said.

“The building of smart parking facilities, street lamps and use of artificial intelligence in various areas has made the city smarter,” he said.

Analysts said China’s efforts to foster a new development paradigm and implement the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25) will provide stronger impetus to the integrated development of the three regions.

“With sound urban planning in place and the fostering of an enabling environment, we have enough reasons to believe that Xiong’an will become a new growth engine and a city built to international standards.”

Li Jianhe, founder and president of Jingxiong Group

Under the plan a set of new policies and programmes will be launched to transfer Beijing’s non-capital functions to areas including Xiong’an, which will grow more quickly over the next five years.

The industry and innovation chains between Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei will be better integrated, and a rail transit network connecting the three areas will be completed. The plan also highlighted the need to better co-ordinate measures in air pollution control and prevent excessive exploitation of groundwater in the region.

Zhang Jie, a professor of economics and deputy dean in the Beijing Academy of Development and Strategy at the Renmin University of China, said the country’s efforts to foster a new development paradigm, with the domestic market as the mainstay and the domestic and international markets reinforcing each other, will provide the most important window of opportunity for the three areas to integrate.

A primary challenge will be reinforcing the integrated growth of industry, supply and innovation chains and enabling their optimised distribution in the three areas, he said.

To drive the integration of the region, Beijing must lead the co-ordinated development in the area and amplify its role as a centre for innovation in science and technology, an international centre for consumption and for the digital economy, he said.

Ye Zhenyu, a researcher on regional economies with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, highlighted the importance of employing market methods in promoting the transfer of noncapital functions from Beijing.

The three areas must expand the coverage of high-quality public services with the development of emerging technologies, and must continue narrowing the divide in the level of public services, he said.

Mr Li of Jingxiong Group said Xiong’an should offer talent policies, including in the areas of social security, housing, education and healthcare, to get more people to relocate to the new area.

“With sound urban planning in place and the fostering of an enabling environment, we have enough reasons to believe that Xiong’an will become a new growth engine and a city built to international standards,” he said.